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ABSTRACT

A discussion of bilingualism in young children in the Soviet Union looks at the three main forms of early bilingualism (bilingual home environment, different languages spoken at home and in school, and second language instruction in school), notes the challenges they pose for development and maintenance of bilingual skills, and then describes a program using a communicative approach to teach second language to preschoolers. Vocabulary and content carefully selected to be appropriate for children's communication were organized into games that built new language skills and incorporated free activity on the part of the children. Initially, the approach met with resistance by teachers, but gained popularity among teachers and the public. Changes in the Soviet concept of preschool education, emerging in about 1988, shifted the emphasis from preschool as preparation for later schooling to preschool as a place to both learn and develop trust and well-being. A special research project was begun to help teachers guide, observe, and control the language-learning process in this context. The system of communication games used initially has evolved and been adapted for use with older students and students with special needs. (MSE)

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EARLY BILINGUALISM: THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE

Elena J. Negnevitskaya

The Fourth Milton and Eleanor Fromer Lecture
on Early Childhood Education

March 5, 1990

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4. Dr. Elena J. Negnevitskaya, March 5, 1990
   Early Bilingualism: The Soviet Experience

EARLY BILINGUALISM:
THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE

Elena J. Negnevitskaya

Early bilingualism is widespread in the USSR, a land of 130 languages. Until a few years ago official proclamations claimed that language problems had finally been resolved; each language had the opportunity "to develop and blossom freely" and "the Soviet people voluntarily chose Russian as the language of international communication" (i.e., between Soviet Republics). Thus, the tensions and even bloodshed that recently erupted as a result of language differences came as a surprise.

Along with a strong trend of greater independence in many Soviet Republics, recent legislation has given the languages of 14 main republics official (state) status. Consequently, Russians living in non-Russian republics, who in the past could function in "the language of international communication," now have to learn the local language. In addition, there has been a demand for schooling from kindergarten through university, as well as radio and TV broadcasts, in the native tongue, even among people belonging to very small national groups.

This claim, as natural and fair as it might sound, is rather difficult to put into effect. Take the case of a Tadzik child living in the Uzbek Republic (where Tadziks constitute about 10% of the population). He or she would have to learn four languages: Tadzik as the mother tongue spoken at home; Uzbek as the official (state) languge of the republic; Russian as the means of communication within the Soviet Union; and a foreign language as a compulsory subject in the national school curriculum. A difficult feat indeed! Moreover, there are many scholars, especially in the

Soviet Baltic Republics, who are opposed to early bilingualism, and who even consider it an impediment to child development (e.g., Hint, 1987).

Research and Theory on Early Bilingualism

For the last 12 years, I have headed a research group for early bilingualism at the Institute of Preschool Education, Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, USSR. This group of linguists, psychologists and educators, is responsible for studying the issue of bilingualism, and for developing programs and methods for teaching Russian as a second language in non-Russian preschools in the republics, as well as foreign languages to Russian-speaking children. The work has provided a unique opportunity to travel all over the country, and to observe a wide range of bilingual situations in the general context of child development.

The research has been based on Leo Vygotsky's theories regarding language, speech and development. Vygotsky considered language and speech acquisition to be the crucial point in human development. He argued that human beings are distinguished from other living creatures by their ability to use language signs and rules, to express ideas, transmit knowledge, and diffuse culture. Studying language acquisition within the general course of intellectual and emotional development, he demonstrated that those processes are interrelated. He also gave a brilliant analysis of relations between thought and speech, describing the former as "a cloud that bursts into a shower of words" (Vygotsky, 1980, 1983).

In light of the tremendous importance of verbal communication for early development, intellectual activity, schooling and personal life, one of the primary tasks of preschool education seems to be to provide opportunities to acquire at least one language at the appropriate level. Aside from the need to define and evaluate

this level, the question naturally arises: What language is it to be, if there is a choice?

A worldwide trend is currently evident among national minorities, to maintain their own language, traditions and culture, and to provide their children with a preschool education in the language of the minority. The choice, so vital to the child's future, is made by parents who often do not realize the responsibility they are assuming. Parents usually believe that the child will quickly acquire the main language of the country, once he or she begins school. They feel that the use of the native tongue in the home and the preschool will guarantee the child's bilingualism. This assumption is based on a widespread belief, that young children easily learn languages in natural environments, without any special training. Our experience, however, proves that this is not always the case.

Types of Early Bilingualism

There are roughly three types of early bilingualism in the Soviet Union: children from bilingual families, children whose home language differs from that of their preschool environment, and children who are introduced to a second language once they begin school.

1. Bilingual Family

One type of early bilingualism results when parents, or other members of the child's family, speak different tongues, and the child is exposed to more than one language system from a very early age. There is some evidence (e.g., Imedadze, 1980) that, if the family strictly follows the rule of "one person, one language," the child will acquire both languages at equal levels

and be completely bilingual, showing no signs of development difficulties. Until the age of three, the two language systems are usually mixed up (e.g., the child produces utterances composed of words in language A according to the syntax rules of language B), but later they are relatively separated, and the child can easily switch from one language to the other.

Observations of bilingual families have indicated, however, that there are very few in which the rule of "one person, one language" is strictly practiced. While the parents may use different languages in their one-to-one contacts with the child, they usually use only one of the languages when communicating with each other. The language of parent-to-parent communication becomes dominant, and the child realizes that mother only pretends not to know father's language. He or she thus tends to choose the dominating language more often. The next challenge to "language equality" arises when the child attends school, since the "non-school" language spoken at home is rarely supported by literacy. This means that one of the languages is used within a very limited everyday sphere. It can hardly be considered the means to preserve the minority culture, unless parents make a special effort to promote the language (e.g., to teach their children to read in it).

2. Second Language at Preschool

In the second type of early bilingualism, the child speaks the first language in the family, and the second one in nursery school or at the playground (at age 2-3). Some children face serious difficulties when exposed to a strange language environment too early (before age three). Their speech and even intellectual development are sometimes slow in comparison to that of their monolingual peers. Much depends on the extent of support and the pedagogical skills of those who communicate with the child in the

non-family language. It is especially important for such children to receive emotional support. Nevertheless, under proper conditions, these children overcome their difficulties by the age 5-6, and they are usually ready to undergo schooling in the second language.

Many parents in the Soviet Republics have sent their children to Russian-speaking preschools at the age of 2 or 3, in the hopes that they will become bilingual, learning Russian as a second language (although the situation is rapidly changing in some republics). These parents believe that three years in a Russian-speaking preschool completely prepares their children to learn in a Russian school. However, observations and objective evidence prove that this is not always the case. Children of the same nationality ten to form a "national minigroup," limiting their contact to native speakers during play-time and other activities. Teachers are often erroneously convinced that these children have a full command of Russian, as their performance in class appears adequate. Initially, we had the same impression while observing multilingual kindergarten classes, but when we asked the teacher to place the non-Russian children in the front row, so that they could not see what the others were doing, we found that they did not understand the teacher's explanations and instructions. They had simply been imitating the Russian children, while the teacher truly believed they were following her instructions. This shows that teachers often have unprofessional views on the nature of language performance and bilingualism. Moreover, many parents mistakenly think that the ability to recite a poem, sing a song or give quick standard answers to a few standard questions (such as, "What is your name?" and "How old are you?") signifies language competency.

In situations of this nature, which are relatively frequent in Soviet kindergartens, the non-Russian-speaking children do not acquire the knowledge and skills required by the curriculum. The

curriculum and teaching methods are identical for all Russian-speaking kindergartens, whether they are in Moscow or Uzbekistan, under the assumption that all children in these preschools speak Russian as their mother tongue at the appropriate level. Yet, the majority of children in the republics hardly meet this criterion. At the same time, non-Russians in Russian kinder- gartens often lag behind in mother-tongue development in comparison to children attending national kindergartens, who are taught the same curriculum in their native language. This situation gives some authors fair grounds to label these children "semi-lingual" and to speak against bilingualism.

3. Second Language at School Age

The third type of Soviet early bilingualism refers to children who speak the native (first) language at home and in the kindergarten, and are given special classes in a second language from the age of 4-5. The introduction of a new language at this age appears to be highly effective, due to modern teaching methods that stimulate second-language skills and general development, and this approach has become popular.

In the 1980s, Russian as a second language was introduced into the kinder- garten curriculum for non-Russian children in the republics. At the same time, some preschools started teaching five- and six-year-olds European languages, mostly English, as that was the desire of many parents. It was believed that an early start would be beneficial for active language skills. It was the task of my research group to work out teaching principles and techniques.

Abandoning the Rote Method in Favor of Communication

Our theory and methodology for teaching preschoolers a new language were based on Vygotsky's ideas of language development (Vygotsky, 1980, 1983), as promoted by his pupils (e.g., A. Luria and P. Galperin), as well as on evidence obtained in psycholinguistic studies of children's speech (e.g., Slobin, 1971). The scholars challenged the approach, dominant for centuries, that considers imitation and reproduction of adult speech to be the main mechanisms of language development. They found that teaching methods based on repetition and memorization of ready-made phrases and texts led to an inability to use the language for communication purposes. Moreover, this was hardly a developing experience, as it did not involve intellectual activity and, as a prominent Russian linguist (Scherba, 1974) pointed out, "did not provide any cause for comparing the means of expressing thoughts in both languages." This rote-based approach is still predominant in the teaching of languages in Soviet schools, and a person who can communicate in a foreign language, after six years of study at school and another three to five years in a college, is a rarity.

Psycholinguistic studies have demonstrated that a child acquiring a language does not just imitate speech phenomena, but also generalizes them and develops his or her own system of rules for language performance, speaking according to those rules. Research on over 40 languages belonging to several linguistic groups, points to universal laws of speech acquisition during childhood regardless of linguistic differences. These rules are put into practice in bilingual situations, when the child is faced with a vital need to use the second language (i.e. bilingual family or peer group, where the majority of children speak that language). Hence, the child acquires the second language in a manner similar to that by which he or she acquired the first one.

Our observations made it clear that such language acquisition processes do not start automatically in every early bilingual situation. Beginning at preschool age, often believed to be the ideal time for language learning, does not in itself guarantee spontaneous bilingualism. The "magic" does not work in the absence of a vital need for communication, and we faced a difficult task: to artificially motivate second-language acts in the absence of natural psychological catalysts.

The Program

Having carefully selected verbal material for the second-language course in the kindergarten, we arranged it in an order that we considered appropriate for progress in communication. As the child's first acts in language acquisition are universally one-word sentences, we started with verbs expressing everyday actions (jump, run, eat, sleep, climb). This enabled communication from the very first moment of the course. A child says just one word - "Fly!" - and everyone is flying happily! The next step was to teach them the names of animals, so that the children could create their own two-word sentences: "Elephant, fly!" "Frog, jump!" "Bear, sleep!"

We found it important to work out carefully the psychological "design" and communication structure of the games, to explore the developing potential of play and afterwards to explain this design to the teacher. Otherwise, teachers often omitted important elements of play design, and the play immediately lost its attraction or turned into a traditional language drill. For example, a game aimed at stimulating the children to create two-word sentences could be organized according to the following scheme: children are playing "animal school," where animals are taught and trained for the circus. Each child holds a toy animal that is randomly called upon to perform, and the children take

turns playing the animal trainer, who is free to choose the animal to perform and the action to be performed. In this way, everyone is actively involved and "on alert": one's animal may be asked to perform at any moment, you have to listen carefully to what is said, to recognize the name of the animal and to perform the movement correctly. The game may be logically concluded as follows: after decorating themselves and their toy animals, the children can give a circus performance, rewarded by applause from the audience.

Language games were designed in accordance with both the objective laws of human speech performance and the rules of play. A series of games was designed to develop pronunciation skills, the ability to discriminate between phonemes of the new language, the acquisition of the lexicon, and grammatical rules.

This new approach to language teaching was initially met with considerable disapproval and resistance by traditional language teachers, as it demanded new views and specific skills from the teacher (i.e. the ability to participate in play, to imitate the "voices" and "mannerisms" of animals, objects and fairy-tale heroes). However, after the book Language and Children was published, first in the USSR and then in Italy (Negnevitskaya & Schachnarovich, 1981; Negnevickaja & Sachnarovic, 1984), the method gained wider public appreciation and became popular among professionals and the public alike. Results of the new method were strikingly different than those traditionally attained after several years of school training (and in language learning the results are largely visible). Moreover, the preschoolers' free activity during the play-lessons and the productive, individualized character of their foreign-language speech, made this approach attractive to both parents and children.

Once we began to train teachers in this method of teaching languages to preschool children, we faced certain problems. We

managed to find solutions only for some of them, but that is a topic for another discussion. What is notable is that about half of the traditional schoolteachers became masters at working with young children, and found that the new experience had given them productive ideas for working with older children.

Changes in the Concept of Preschool

General recognition of our methods was accompanied by changes in the common Soviet attitude towards preschool education. By 1988, a new concept of preschool education in the USSR had been worked out by a group of psychologists and educationalists (Concept, 1988). After a heated debate among scientists, teachers and the public (the project was published in the press), the concept was approved and accepted by the USSR State Committee for Public Education. The team of authors argued that societal attitudes towards the preschool period have led to serious shortcomings in the contents and methods of preschool education, as well as in teachers' training.

Their main reference was to an erroneous assumption about the place and value of the preschool period in the course of human life. Childhood was regarded as the period of "preparation for life." According to the authors of the new concept, the idea of sacrificing one's present life for the great future dates back to the October Revolution and became a dogma soon after 1930. In time, the idea of "preparation for life" was transformed into "preparation for school." Since the 1960s, the main criterion for evaluating preschool education has been the level of progress in attaining knowledge and skills specifically required for school learning. The logical conclusion of the view of childhood as "preparation for life" is that adults know life better, know what is needed in order to prepare for life, and thus have the right "to teach life." "Adults for upbringing and teaching, children

for learning and obeying," has been the motto of preschool education for more than 50 years. Until recently, the model kindergarten curriculum was obligatory for all public preschools, as well as teacher-training institutes. This curriculum contains a detailed description of contents and methods for the moral, intellectual and physical development of children (including the very songs and dances to be performed during a certain month of the school year). It disregards important aspects of learning, such as human communication, games and activities, expressions of personal feelings and information about the world outside the USSR.

The new concept of preschool education considers the mode of communication and interaction between children and adults to be the core of preschool education. The authors distinguish two models of interaction: a teaching/disciplinary model and a personality-oriented one (see Table). In the former, aimed at investing children with specific knowledge and skills, the methodological instructions attached to the curriculum become a kind of law, permitting no exceptions. The child is regarded as an object to whom the teaching system is applied. Frontal teaching techniques, similar to those employed in school, are widespread. Activity is suppressed for the sake of a superficial order and discipline, and there is no room for play. One of the more serious negative results of this approach is a "dual morality." Because preschoolers are strictly managed and watched, their behavior changes abruptly in the teacher's absence. That is, the child's good behavior in the kindergarten may often be the result of acquiring the rule "not to be myself, but to act as my superior wants me to act so long as I am subordinate."

In contrast, in the alternative personality-oriented model, aimed at developing trust and well-being, the child is regarded as a partner with full rights. This model does not abolish systematic efforts for educating children. One of the central points in this

new approach to a preschool curriculum is the fostering of universal values, rather than values "that might seem relevant for a certain group of people at a certain time in a certain area" (Concept, 1988, p. 17). The approach that we proposed for teaching languages to young children and, more generally, for developing speech and communication skills, was selected as a basis for this alternative model.

Two Preschool Curriculum Models

	Teacher/Disciplinary Model	Personality-Oriented Model
Aim	To invest children with knowledge and skills	To invoke a feeling of protection, to develop trust, to foster well-being
Motto of Interaction	"Do as I do!"	"Not above and not beside, but together!"
Means of Communication	Instructions, explanations, prohibitions, threats, punishments, "morals," scolding	Understanding, appreciation, acceptance of child's individual interests, peculiarities, position and feelings
Tactics	Dictates and surveillance	Cooperation
Teacher's Function	To put the curriculum into practice, to satisfy the demands of the authorities and inspectors	To consider the child's interests and developmental potential as an individual member of society

Source: Concept, 1988, pp. 12-14

Further Development of the Language Program

A special research project was initiated to help teachers work with children in the new language media. By means of long-term observations in kindergartens, and psycholinguistic analyses of the curriculum, teaching methods and manuals for kindergarten teachers, we collected the "verbal corpus" of real communication in the kindergarten (vocabulary, phrase structures used by teachers, the communication tasks children meet most frequently, and verbal means used by the teachers to perform those tasks). For example, when a teacher communicates with children about their painting activity, he or she uses: names of colors, shapes, painting tools, and actions specific to painting; words expressing spatial relations (e.g., on, near, around); words to comment on the child' painting; and special phrase structures for explanations and questions about painting.

On the basis of this research, we recommended that teachers structure their language while speaking to newcomers -- that they try to use a limited number of phrase constructions, and that they utilize a certain chain of preparatory techniques to facilitate communication. These techniques include, for example, practicing the names of colors and shapes in special games (like those described above); demonstrating actions to match the words (e.g., using dolls, puppets or toy animals who dip brushes, make dots, draw lines). This preparatory work, which is very entertaining fo the children, is an effective language exercise, and helps the teacher to guide, observe and control the progress of language acquisition.

The system of games described above (see also Negnevitskaya, 1986) has been used widely: for special second-language classes in the kindergarten, for language teaching in primary and secondary schools and in adult courses, in work with children having behavioral or speech problems, and as a support technique for

bilingual kindergarten groups. The contents and rules of the game are adapted to the age level of the students and the educational aims of the program, but the psychological schemes are preserved and appear to be effective.

It is important to note that communication games, and the mode of teacher-student communication fostered by them, contribute to the child's personality development. Children constantly face individual problems within the context of group activity, and they cannot help making intellectual efforts, as they are expressing their own ideas, using their imagination and developing self-control in speech. After demonstrating the games in sessions with children on Soviet TV's weekly "English for Little Ones," we received many letters from parents and teachers, saying the program had changed their attitude towards communication with children, and that it had stimulated new ideas for making this communication more effective, emotional and creative. Succcessful attempts to apply the system of games in kindergartens in several countries, have encouraged us to continue to implement a communication games method -- not only for teaching language, but also for other aspects of the preschool curriculum.

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